

MARYLAND

Man convicted in 2012 fatal shooting of Pr. George’s student

**BY WESLEY ROBINSON**

Travon Donnell Bennett, the 21-year-old man charged with killing a high school senior on his walk to school, was found guilty Monday of second-degree murder and armed robbery.

Bennett was accused of shooting Marckel Ross, 18, in September 2012. Ross was walking to Central High School in Capitol Heights when Bennett tried to rob him, police said. Ross, an honor student, was the second of six Prince George’s County high school students killed over a six-month period between late 2012 and early 2013.

After two hours of deliberation,

the jury found Bennett was not guilty of first-degree murder but was guilty of the other counts against him, including possession of a handgun as a minor. He faces life in prison without parole for the murder and 25 years for the other charges.

Ross’s family attended the entire trial and was relieved with the verdict. His mother, Elizabeth, said she was worried about a bad outcome over the weekend but is happy with the result.

“I feel like: Marckel, you had your day — it’s finally over with,” Ross said.

Ross said she will be able to move on and not second-guess the death of her son, which she said

has caused stress and insomnia.

She said she doesn’t think Bennett is remorseful, and she is hoping for a maximum sentence.

“He doesn’t need to ever come home,” Ross said. “I can forgive him in other senses, but he needs to stay locked up.”

Clayton Aarons, attorney for Bennett, said there was no evidence the murder was premeditated, adding that the jury looked at the facts of the case and made a just decision.

“We asked that [the jurors] were fair and just, that’s what we got,” Aarons said.

Prosecutors said they will seek the maximum sentence for Bennett, who is awaiting trial on at-

tempted murder and armed robbery counts in a separate case stemming from an incident in May 2012.

Prince George’s State’s Attorney Angela Alsobrooks (D) praised police for solving the case, which took four months of investigation, including checking alibis and constructing a timeline of the murder with little evidence initially.

Assistant State’s Attorney Wes Adams said that the jury arrived at the correct verdict based on the evidence and was pleased with its quick decision.

Bennett and his friends Kendall Bland, 23, and Jeremy Brown, 22, committed an armed robbery Oct. 31, 2012, using the .38-caliber re-

volver that killed Ross, prosecutors said. Before the October 2012 robbery, police had no leads to the identity of Ross’s killer but knew the model and type of bullets used.

As part of a deal in the October 2012 robbery case, Bland testified at the murder trial that Bennett told him that he killed Ross.

“He told me he tried to rob him, and the kid flinched at him ... then he killed him,” Bland testified last week.

Bennett is scheduled for sentencing Oct. 10.

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Julie Zauzmer contributed to this report.

MARYLAND

St. Mary’s teachers to cease extra work

**BY OVETTA WIGGINS**

Teachers in St. Mary’s County plan to stop doing the “extras” and will focus only on instruction as part of a protest over pay, union officials said Monday.

When classes begin next week, a majority of teachers in the school district plan to participate in a “back to basics” job action that includes refusing to give homework, work overtime, volunteer for extracurricular activities or contact parents after school hours.

Anna Laughlin, president of the Education Association of St. Mary’s County, said teachers are frustrated with the way the county funds its public schools and hope to draw attention to their lagging salaries.

“We remain committed to our students, and no area of instruction will be compromised,” Laughlin said. “However, our teachers can no longer work for free and continually get passed over year after year for salary increases.”

Laughlin said 80 percent of the 1,300 teachers in the small-but-growing district in southern Maryland, which serves 17,840 students, plan to cut out the work that is done outside the school day.

The protest comes as the teachers union and the school board negotiate a new contract for the district’s 910 unionized teachers. The sticking point: pay raises.

James Scott Smith, the county’s acting assistant superintendent of instruction, said that school officials recently learned of the teachers’ plans and that principals will meet with teachers in their schools to have a “frank discussion” about what the impact might be.

“Each building is different and has different things going on, so it’s hard to make a blanket statement about impact,” Smith said. “At this point, it’s hard to tell.”

Sean Sayers, a seventh-grade social studies teacher who came up with the idea for the “back to basics” initiative, said teachers have been giving too much and getting too little in return.

“I have seen so many teachers give so much of their core being and yet they struggle to make basic bills,” Sayers said.

He said he would prefer not to take the action, considering the potential impact on the school system and its students. But, he said, the teachers cannot continue to stay quiet.

“We love our kids and we know this is going to impact the kids,” Sayers said. “But the problem is inertia. We have to do something, even if we take a little bit of a hit.”

The action in St. Mary’s follows a similar protest last spring in Fairfax County, Va. A group of teachers at McLean High School in March said they would cut back on extracurricular activities, including science and art fairs, additional academic help, and chaperoning proms, to protest a lack of pay raises.

In St. Mary’s, where 96 percent of the classes are taught by highly qualified teachers and 91 percent of its students graduate in four years, Laughlin said salary increases have been sporadic as the demands of the job have grown.

The teachers received an increase in salary last year. However, she said, they had not received raises in the two years prior. She said the district has been “playing catch up” with the pay raises.

When Laughlin became a teacher in 1988, the school system’s budget represented 51 percent of the county’s budget. This year it was 37 percent of the county’s budget.

Laughlin said a teacher with 10 years of experience and a master’s degree earns about \$60,000 a year in St. Mary’s, a stagnating figure that has not kept up with other jurisdictions.

She said she would make \$15,000 more if she worked in neighboring Calvert County.

“Until additional county funding becomes a reality, educators are committed to this sacrifice, and it is a sacrifice because going above and beyond the call of duty is what we do,” she said.

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MARYLAND

At Montgomery fair, pushing bus rapid transit

**BY BILL TURQUE**

For entertainment on wheels, visitors to the Montgomery County Agricultural Fair in Gaithersburg could seek out monster trucks, the demolition derby or the tractor pull.

But county officials and transit enthusiasts on Monday were proud to introduce something they consider far more exciting. To make sure folks don’t miss it, they plopped it right in front of the main ticket entrance: a bright, shiny new bus.

Not just any bus, either. It is the kind of bus that transportation planners hope will someday whisk commuters through the county on a network of bus-only lanes, quickly and smoothly enough to entice residents from their cars and relieve some of the county’s gruesomely heavy traffic.

“This is an issue that is long overdue,” said County Executive Isiah Leggett (D), who joined several County Council members and bus rapid transit supporters at the fair Monday morning to promote the virtues of a 98-mile system that they hope will one day extend from Clarksburg to Friendship Heights and from Westfield Montgomery Mall to Langley Park.

Bus rapid transit is on the ground in Cleveland, Chicago, Seattle and Austin. Many more cities and counties have systems in the works. The first such system in the Washington region is slated to open this month in Crystal City and Arlington County’s Potomac Yard.

“We are definitely hoping that this is what the future of transit will look like in Montgomery,” said David Hauck, executive director of Communities for Transit, a nonprofit group dedicated to educating the public about bus rapid transit.

The diesel-powered, \$850,000 on exhibit at the county fair is “articulated,” which is transit-speak for two buses linked by an accordion-like apparatus. It is fresh off an Alabama assembly line and headed for service in Denver, and it can hold about 100 people, sitting and standing.

While some bus rapid transit vehicles mimic a train design, with an extended nose and coverings



PHOTOS BY MATT MCCLAIN/THE WASHINGTON POST



**AT TOP:** Alan Pemberton of Silver Spring tours a rapid transit bus on display at the Montgomery County Agricultural Fair in Gaithersburg. **ABOVE:** People walk by the bus. It was on display to promote a 98-mile system of bus-only lanes that officials and bus rapid transit supporters hope will one day improve traffic.

over the wheels, this one is your basic bus, much like the ones that Metro has used for years.

What matters, bus rapid transit boosters said, is not esthetics but reliability. Projections show traffic congestion growing 70 percent in the county by 2040 as population and jobs continue to stream in.

“We have a lot riding on this,” said County Council member Marc Elrich (D-At Large) apologizing in advance for the play on words. Elrich was a major early advocate of bus rapid transit and is widely credited with getting the option included in the long-range transportation plan the council passed last year.

Studies are underway for a route on Georgia Avenue from the Wheaton Metro station to Olney. Other lines likely to be among the first built are along Rockville Pike (state Route 355) and Wisconsin Avenue from Rockville to Bethesda and along Colesville Road and

Columbia Pike (U.S. Route 29) from Burtonsville to Silver Spring.

The proposals are causing some controversy. Olney residents have expressed alarm about early maps presented by the Maryland State Highway Administration, which show that some businesses could be wiped out by new bus rapid transit lanes. It is not clear how the system — which will cost \$1 billion to \$2 billion — will be financed. Estimated construction costs per mile are as high as \$25 million. While that’s still far less costly than light rail, no funding source has been identified.

Leggett said Monday that the county’s hoped-for bus rapid transit system will not be built all at once. He expected that it will be paid for with a combination of county and state funds, along with contributions from developers who stand to gain from a new transit system.

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THE DISTRICT

City asks judge to order sale of Park Southern

**BY MIKE DEBONIS**

The District government has asked a judge to order the sale of a troubled Southeast Washington apartment complex that has become a mayoral campaign flash point, alleging Monday that a prominent political activist “grossly mismanaged” the property to the point that it owes \$700,000 to the city and \$560,000 in utility bills.

Conditions at the Park Southern Apartments have deteriorated to the point that “even a minimal renovation would cost millions of dollars,” the city’s attorneys said in Monday’s filing in D.C. Superior Court. They argued that a court-supervised sale from a tenant-run nonprofit corporation to a new owner is the best way to bring about improvements.

A letter from the city that was distributed Monday to the building’s more than 700 low-income tenants says such a sale “is neces-

sary to pay off the outstanding debts of [the nonprofit owner], provide funds to repair the building, and provide new ownership that will stabilize the finances and bolster day-to-day operations going forward.”

The missive included assurances to tenants: “We will require that a new owner preserves affordability, upgrades the physical condition of the Property, and fosters a community structure that includes resident participation.”

Park Southern has been under close scrutiny in recent weeks because of the ties between the nonprofit’s president, the Rev. Rowena Joyce Scott, and city officials, including Mayor Vincent C. Gray (D) and the Democratic nominee to succeed him, D.C. Council member Muriel Bowser (Ward 4).

In an interview Monday, Scott characterized the city’s petition as a ploy to sell the building to a management company installed at Park Southern this year at the

city’s request. Accusations about her mismanagement of the property are rooted in politics, not reality, she said.

Scott, a former president of the Ward 8 Democrats, a political organization, supported Gray in his 2010 election bid but changed her allegiance to Bowser in this year’s primary campaign. While the Park Southern nonprofit corporation fell further and further behind on its loan obligations to the city, the Gray administration did not move to place the loan in default until the day after the primary.

Besides Scott, Bowser also counts among her supporters Phinis Jones, who briefly managed the property this year before it was taken over by the city. He has attempted to buy the building in partnership with Scott for \$3.7 million — a price the city’s filing says is less than half of its fair-market value.

Scott said Monday that she and Jones are willing to revise the

terms of their purchase offer but that the city is refusing to entertain any negotiations. “They’re not trying to work with us at all,” she said. “The mayor wants me humiliated and embarrassed.”

Donald Temple, an attorney for Jones, said he did not believe the city could dictate the terms under which the nonprofit sells the building but said his client has prepared an “extremely competitive” revised offer.

The city is seeking to intervene in a lawsuit filed in April by a tenants’ group against Scott and the nonprofit corporation. The new filing lays out numerous allegations of “gross mismanagement and neglect,” arguing that under better management the complex could generate enough revenue to cover its expenses.

Among the misdeeds alleged in the filing are a failure to collect back rent, the improper expenditure of nearly \$130,000 in tenant security deposits that the city says

should have been held in escrow, and the flouting of election procedures to allow Scott to “stack the Board with her friends and relatives.” A hearing in the case is set for Aug. 29.

Bowser has denied acting to favor Scott or Jones and has asked the District’s inspector general to investigate the matter. However, she has resisted calls from the Gray administration and fellow mayoral candidate and council member David A. Catania (I-At Large) to hold a public hearing of her council committee, which oversees housing matters.

Spokesmen for Bowser’s campaign and council office did not respond Monday to requests for comment on the city’s filing.

Scott on Monday made her own call for an investigation — into the relationship between the management firm installed by the city and officials at the D.C. Department of Housing and Community Development, the agency which administered the \$3.1 million loan to Park Southern.

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Aaron C. Davis contributed to this report.

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